

CLAIMS

1. A shopping assistance method, comprising the steps of:
 - 5 - sending an enquiry message from an enquirer to a service system, the enquiry message including a description of an item of interest which description is intended for human interpretation and takes the form of image and/or unstructured audio data;
 - at the service system, automatically:
 - determining a location associated with the enquiry,
 - 10 - selecting from a database of traders, traders appropriate to the enquiry at least in terms of location and the type of the item of interest, and
 - forwarding the description of the item of interest to the selected traders in an availability enquiry; and
 - providing a way for the selected traders to respond to the enquiry.
- 15 2. A method according to claim 1, wherein said location is the location of the enquirer.
3. A method according to claim 2, wherein the enquiry message is sent from a mobile entity over a cellular radio infrastructure to the service system, the latter determining the
- 20 location of the enquirer from a location server of the cellular radio infrastructure.
4. A method according to claim 1, wherein said location is a shopping location identified in the enquiry message by the enquirer.
- 25 5. A method according to claim 1, wherein the enquiry message includes a structured data part containing at least one type parameter for the item of interest, this at least one parameter being used in selecting said traders.
6. A method according to claim 1, wherein the service system is operative to process said
- 30 description to extract at least one type parameter for the item of interest, this at least one parameter being used in selecting said traders.

7. A method according to claim 1, wherein said availability enquiry contains contact information enabling a said selected trader to directly contact the enquirer to inform the latter, on the basis of the description contained in the availability enquiry, about the availability through the trader of items of the same type as the item of interest.

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8. A method according to claim 1, wherein at least one said selected trader, on the basis of the description contained in the availability enquiry, sends a response to the service system giving information about the availability through the trader of items of the same type as the item of interest.

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9. A method according to claim 8, wherein the service system forwards said response to the enquirer.

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10. A method according to claim 8, wherein the service system stores said response and the enquirer subsequently contacts the service system and retrieves the response.

11. A method according to claim 8, wherein multiple selected traders provide respective responses to the service system, the service system collating the responses and forwarding them to the enquirer.

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12. A method according to claim 8, wherein multiple selected traders provide respective responses to the service system, the service system collating the responses and storing them, the enquirer subsequently contacting the service system and retrieving the collated responses.

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13. A method according to claim 8, wherein the enquirer having received a said response via the service system and having decided that the response is of interest, directly contacts the trader concerned using trader contact information contained in the response.

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14. A method according to claim 13, wherein direct contact is established by at least one of telephone, voice mail, fax, or e-mail.

15. A method according to claim 8, wherein the enquirer having received a said response via the service system and having decided that the response is of interest, requests the service system to establish direct live communication between the enquirer and trader concerned, the service system thereupon serving to mediate the establishment of direct live contact.

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16. A method according to claim 15, wherein direct contact is established as a voice circuit via a telephone system, the service system interacting with a call setup interface of the telephone system to set up said voice circuit.

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17. A method according to claim 8, wherein the enquirer having received a said response via the service system and having decided that the response is of interest, requests the trader concerned, via service system, to establish direct communication with the enquirer, this request including contact information for enabling the trader to contact the enquirer.

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18. A method according to claim 1, wherein a said selected trader, on the basis of the description contained in the availability enquiry, sends a response to the enquirer, either directly or via said service system, giving a URI where the enquirer can find information about items of the same type as the item of interest that are available through the trader.

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19. A method according to claim 18, wherein the enquirer uses said URI to access said information.

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20. A method according to claim 1, wherein the service system in sending said availability enquiry does not disclose the identity of the enquirer.

21. A shopping-assistance service system, comprising:

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 - an enquiry-receiving subsystem for receiving an enquiry message from a remote enquirer over a communications network, the enquiry message including a description of an item of interest which description is intended for human interpretation and takes the form of image and/or unstructured audio data;

- a store for at least temporarily storing said description;
 - a location subsystem for automatically determining a location associated with the enquiry,
 - a trader selection subsystem for automatically selecting from a database of traders, 5 traders appropriate to the enquiry at least in terms of location and the type of the item of interest, and
 - an output subsystem for forwarding the description of the item of interest to the selected traders in an availability enquiry; and
 - an enquirer-contact subsystem for providing a way for the selected traders to respond 10 to the enquiry.
22. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquiry message is sent from a mobile entity over a cellular radio infrastructure to the service system, the location subsystem of the service system being operative to determine the location of the enquirer from a location 15 server of the cellular radio infrastructure.
23. A system according to claim 21, wherein said location is included in the enquiry message and the location subsystem is operative to extract this location from the enquiry message.
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24. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquiry message includes a structured data part containing at least one type parameter for the item of interest, the trader selection subsystem being operative to access this type parameter and use it in selecting said traders.
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25. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquirer-contact subsystem is operative to cause the output subsystem to include enquirer contact details in said availability enquiry.
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26. A system according to claim 21, wherein the enquirer-contact subsystem is operative to receive responses from the selected traders and to make them available, either individually or as a collation, to the enquirer.

27. A system according to claim 26, wherein is operative to make the trader responses available to the enquirer by forwarding them over a communications network towards the enquirer.
- 5 28. A system according to claim 26, wherein the enquirer-contact subsystem is operative to make the trader responses available by storing them at the service system for retrieval by the enquirer.
- 10 29. A system according to claim 26, wherein the enquirer-contact subsystem is further operative, in responsive to the enquirer indicating that they wish to contact the trader who originated a particular said response, to mediate the establishment of direct live contact between the enquirer and that trader.
- 15 30. A system according to claim 29, wherein the enquirer-contact subsystem is operative to mediate the establishment of direct live contact by interacting with a call setup interface of a telephone network system to set up a voice circuit between the enquirer and trader.
- 20 31. A system according to claim 29, wherein the enquirer-contact subsystem is operative to mediate the establishment of direct live contact by sending a request to the trader concerned to establish direct communication with the enquirer, this request including contact information for enabling the trader to contact the enquirer.